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Ambassador Bolton's op ed on President Obama's leadership vacuum in handling the Benghazi attacks

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***"Benghazi Bungle: Obama's Pass-The-Buck Presidency,"
from The Daily Beast:***

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From Hillary Clinton's artful dodging to Leon Panetta's clueless hindsight, the Obama administration's bungling on Benghazi proves they can't keep us safe.

by John Bolton |

February 10, 2013

The Obama administration's national-security leadership vacuum was on full display during the February 7 Senate hearing with Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey. Called at last to explain why America failed to guard effectively against the September 11 assault on our Benghazi consulate, and what happened during the attack itself, Panetta's and Dempsey's inadequate answers augur even graver dangers ahead.

Coupled with former secretary of State Hillary Clinton's artful dodging during her January 23 Benghazi testimony, the Panetta-Dempsey sequel exposed what can only be called dereliction of duty, primarily by President Obama himself but also by his subordinates. This is not about simply another Benghazi postmortem, but an important insight into the ongoing weakness and inattention that is debilitating our ability to defend ourselves and our global interests. In Obama's first term, the cancer spread slowly, but in his second it risks rapidly metastasizing, spurred on by the cumulative effects of massive Defense budget cuts already made, combined with the looming effects of the March 1 budget sequestration.

On September 11, Panetta and Dempsey were at a previously scheduled White House meeting with Obama when word of the Benghazi attack reached them. The president's response, Panetta testified, was, "Do whatever you need to do to be able to protect our people there." Sen. Kelly Ayotte asked whether Obama wanted specifics, like "how long it would take to deploy assets, including armed aviation, to the area?" "No," said Panetta, Obama "left it up to us." That was the last communication between the Pentagon and the commander in chief, and the last time Panetta spoke to anyone at the White House that day.

Words cannot adequately describe the implications of Obama's lack of interest. Importantly, at the attack's outset, it was obviously impossible to know whether Benghazi was a one-shot incident or the start of a wider onslaught throughout the region. The issue, therefore, was not merely what to do in Libya but other potential scenarios that needed presidential consideration and decision, none of which Obama apparently troubled himself with. It is insufficient that his subordinates remained in touch with Defense thereafter. The buck doesn't stop on their desks.

Equally stunning, neither Panetta nor Dempsey spoke even once to Clinton on September 11. State Department

personnel were in mortal danger, one of its posts was under attack, with the risk of conflict spreading, and Clinton never called Panetta? I have served under six different secretaries of State (Haig, Shultz, Baker, Eagleburger, Powell, and Rice), and it is inconceivable that they would not have called their Pentagon counterparts not once but repeatedly until Americans at risk were secure and the situation resolved. Inconceivable.

Clinton previously testified she was unaware of Ambassador Christopher Stevens's numerous requests for enhanced security in Libya. Her defenders argue she could not be expected to read all cables coming from U.S. posts around the world, but no one has ever suggested she should have. Clearly, however, Clinton floated so far above the State Department that she failed to convey to her staff adequate interest in security issues, even regarding rising dangers in a country the administration touted as a major foreign policy success. Clinton's ignorance of al Qaeda training camps and expanding terrorist bases in Libya obviously had fatal implications for four Americans, but these growing threats also embodied larger questions of al Qaeda's rise in the Islamic Maghreb, and throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, spreading terrorist threats and capabilities directly contradicted the administration's soothing line that al Qaeda was "on the road to defeat," as Obama himself said in accepting the renomination for president five days before the Benghazi murders.

How chilling it was to hear General Dempsey testify he was fully aware of al Qaeda's threat in Libya while Clinton, the official responsible for official Americans in-country, knew nothing. And equally chilling, neither Clinton nor anyone at State ever requested more assistance from Defense. While responsibility certainly rests primarily with Clinton, Panetta's and Dempsey's answers were inexcusably bureaucratic. Libya's deteriorating security situation and rising terrorist menace threatened America generally, not just our diplomats there. Did not Defense's top officials think it appropriate to raise this issue with Clinton? Didn't these people talk to each other?

Thursday's hearing barely touched on the administration's post-Benghazi yarn that it was not a terrorist attack but a demonstration against the now-famous Mohammed video that spiraled out of control. Testimony by State officials days after the attack confirmed they knew (although it apparently never reached Clinton) that terrorists were responsible because security personnel under fire during the attack were so reporting by cellphone. Panetta and Dempsey were both clear that they knew on September 11 that Benghazi was the work of terrorists. Once again, therefore, we have no explanation for the administration's repeated reference to the video.

Sen. Lindsey Graham asked the day's most telling question: Who was in charge as the attack progressed? Incredibly, Panetta first responded, "What do you mean, 'in charge'?" Then, perhaps even more incredibly, he said, "It's not that simple," pointing to Ambassador Stevens, "the people on the ground," as being in charge. Pressed further, Panetta said, "We all were [in charge]." Notwithstanding Panetta's confusion, the answer is obvious: The president was in charge. Or should have been.

It is precisely this failure of leadership by the Obama administration, before, during, and after the Benghazi attack, that should concern us. Benghazi was an unnecessary tragedy, compounded by White House incompetence and indifference, but there are far broader risks and threats that are even more gravely concerning. The failures surrounding our second September 11 were only amplified in the following months as al Qaeda assumed control over an area in Mali larger than Texas, and terrorists attacked a large natural-gas facility in Algeria, killing more than 40 foreign hostages.

Benghazi is thus potentially one of those points in history, like the first attack on the World Trade Center, the bombings of our Kenya and Tanzania embassies, or the attack on the USS Cole, that should have given us warning before September 11, 2001. We can only hope that, contrary to all the evidence to date, Obama and his administration wake up before an even greater disaster befalls us.

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Regards,
Stephanie Arje



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